The Recovering Resilient

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Abstract

This paper examines the narrative on 'Regressing Muslims' in the background of the resilience Muslims have shown in recovering from the setbacks they faced in history. They completely recovered from each previous setback and are in the process of doing the same after the recent colonial setback. Key indicators in defence, education, human resources, and the economy have been used to determine whether they are regressing or progressing. A clear direction to improvement is obvious from this comparison.

1 Introduction

The stereotype of 'Regressing Muslims' is a deeply entrenched narrative with historical roots in Orientalism and colonial discourse, significantly propelled by intellectual figures and modern media. Serving various political and ideological agendas throughout history, this perception portrays Muslim societies as inherently backward, resistant to progress, and fundamentally incompatible with modernity. Only a dedicated paper can trace the history of this stereotype. In its recent context, it is often fuelled by selective media coverage of conflict zones and historical generalisations. The stereotype completely overlooks a profound and enduring resilience which enabled Muslim communities to navigate through and overcome formidable setbacks throughout their entire history. Currently, they are in the process of recovering from recent colonialism.

To address this subject, one must look beyond the immediate political volatility of the present day and examine the deep-seated patterns of setback and recovery that have defined Islamic history since its inception. From the devastating 13th-century Mongol sack of Baghdad, which many contemporaries viewed as the end of Islamic civilisation, to the protracted struggle of the Crusades, the Muslim world has frequently stood at the precipice of annihilation, only to emerge with renewed vigour and civilisational depth. Central to this resilience is the ontological strength provided by the Quran.

This paper presents an overview of the major setbacks of Muslim history and the process of recovering from them. The last setback was the colonial hold on their lands, which did not mark the end of Muslim history but rather the beginning of a complex, multifaceted recovery that Muslims are currently passing through. Muslims' recent past with their present has been compared on the basis of key indicators of

defence, education, human resources and economy. The comparison clearly shows the direction of their movement, which is unmistakably toward improvement.

2 Major Setbacks

Muslim civilisation has encountered serious setbacks in its history. The setbacks tested their political influence, social structures, faith, and resilience. From devastating invasions by the Mongols to colonial subjugation, these challenges often threatened the very existence of Islamic polities and cultural continuity. Yet, each major crisis was met with remarkable adaptive strategies, intellectual revitalisation, and a renewed sense of purpose, demonstrating an enduring capacity for recovery and resurgence. The following description explores some of these pivotal setbacks and the mechanisms through which Muslim societies survived and thrived.

2.1 Mongol Invasions of the Muslim World and Fall of Baghdad (13th Century)

Perhaps one of the most catastrophic periods in Islamic history was the Mongol invasion of the Muslim lands in the 13th century. The Mongol expansion under Genghis Khan brought immense destruction to the Muslim world on a scale rarely witnessed in history. In 1220, Mongol armies invaded the Khwarazmian Empire and devastated major centres such as Bukhara and Samarkand, while the region of Khorasan suffered catastrophic ruin. Cities including Herat, Nishapur, and Merv experienced mass slaughter and destruction.

One of the darkest moments in Islamic history came with the fall of Baghdad in 1258. Mongol forces under Hulegu Khan destroyed the Abbasid capital, ending centuries of political and intellectual prominence. Libraries, mosques, schools, and hospitals were ruined, while countless scholars and civilians lost their lives.

However, the Mongol advance was halted at the Battle of Ain Jalut in 1260, where the Mamluks of Egypt, led by Baybars, achieved a decisive victory. This shattered the myth of Mongol invincibility and prevented further expansion into the Muslim world.

The Mongol Empire later divided into several states, including the Golden Horde, Ilkhanate, Chagatai Khanate, and Great Khanate. Over time, many Mongols embraced Islam. Berke Khan became the first Mongol ruler to convert to Islam, opposing the massacre in Baghdad and cooperating with the Mamluks against Hulegu Khan. In 1295, Mahmud Ghazan also accepted Islam, encouraging many Mongols to follow. By the 1330s, the Mongol rule had fragmented, giving rise to many local rulers and the eventual restoration of Muslim control over the land.[1]

Although Mongol invasions symbolised political decline and devastation, they also revealed the resilience of Islamic civilisation. Knowledge and traditions survived

through centres such as Cairo and Damascus, where intellectual and cultural life gradually revived**.**

2.2 Crusades (1096–1291)

Another significant challenge came from the Crusades, a series of religious wars launched by European Christians to reclaim the Holy Land. European Crusaders seized Jerusalem and several regions of the Levant, creating a serious military and ideological challenge for the Muslim world. In the beginning, the divided Muslim states found it difficult to mount an effective response. However, this fragmentation gradually gave way to greater cohesion under leaders such as Saladin, whose leadership helped recover lost territories and significantly roll back Crusader advances. By 1291, the Crusade states were eliminated from Muslim lands.

"The Crusades were disgraceful but formative events in Western history."[2] The Crusades influenced European society during the 12th and 13th centuries, though historians now see them as one factor among many in Europe's transformation. The Crusades significantly expanded Mediterranean trade, especially for Italian cities such as Venice and Genoa, strengthening commerce with the Muslim world and encouraging advances in shipbuilding and banking. Returning Crusaders also increased European demand for spices, textiles, and luxury goods.

Although the Crusades did not greatly transmit Arabic science to Europe, they inspired an extensive process. The Crusades initiated a process that continued. Robert Briffault, in his 'The Making of Humanity', observes that "It was under the influence of the Arabian and Moorish revival of culture, and not in the fifteenth century, that the real Renaissance took place."[3]

Muslim recovery from the Crusades was gradual and driven by political leadership, military organisation, and religious unity. Muslim armies eventually recaptured key cities, including Jerusalem, in 1187. Trade, scholarship, and urban life also revived in major centres such as Cairo and Damascus. Religious scholars encouraged social cohesion and moral reform, while new dynasties rebuilt institutions weakened by war. Over time, Muslim societies adapted politically and economically, transforming the Crusades from a period of crisis into one of recovery, resilience, and renewed cultural development. The rise of the Ottoman Turks, which started during the Crusades, is the reason for Thomas Madden's observation: "Henceforth, crusades were no longer wars to expand Christendom but desperate attempts to slow the advance of Islam. Crusading had become a matter of simple survival."[4]

2.3 Fall of Al-Andalus (1492)

Islamic Spain, or Al-Andalus, was a remarkable civilisation where Muslims, Christians, and Jews lived together and contributed to a rich cultural and intellectual tradition. Muslim forces entered the Iberian Peninsula in 711 and, within a few years, established control over most of the region. Over time, Islamic Spain developed into one of the greatest centres of civilisation, reaching its height during the Umayyad

Caliphate of Cordoba in the tenth century. The main centre of Muslim rule was in southern Spain, particularly Andalusia. Muslim political authority gradually weakened after the tenth century and finally ended in 1492 with the fall of Granada to Christian forces.

Political stability in Islamic Spain was largely achieved through the establishment of the Andalusian Umayyad dynasty, which ruled from 756 to 1031. This stability was mainly due to Abd al-Rahman I, who founded the Emirate of Cordoba and united the different Muslim groups that had conquered Spain. Under Umayyad leadership, Spain became prosperous, organised, and culturally advanced.

The Muslim era in Spain is frequently described as a golden age of learning and culture. Libraries, colleges, hospitals, and public baths were established, while literature, philosophy, poetry, science, and architecture flourished. Muslims, Christians, and Jews all contributed to this intellectual revival. The city of Cordoba became one of the most advanced cities in the world and was admired for its wealth, learning, and civilisation.

Islamic Spain is also remembered for a comparatively high degree of religious coexistence. Christians and Jews were allowed to practise their faiths under Muslim rule, provided they followed certain regulations common to medieval societies. Non-Muslims in Islamic Spain generally enjoyed greater security and freedom than many conquered peoples of that era. They were not forced into ghettos, enslaved, or compelled to convert to Islam.

The decline of Muslim Spain resulted from both internal divisions and increasing pressure from Christian kingdoms in the north. The fall of Toledo in 1085 marked a major turning point. Muslim rulers sought assistance from North Africa, and the forces led by Yusuf ibn Tashfin defeated the Christians in 1086 and temporarily reunited much of Muslim Spain. However, continued rebellions and political fragmentation weakened Islamic rule. By 1492, Granada, the last Muslim kingdom in Spain, had fallen, ending centuries of Muslim sovereignty in Iberia. Soon afterwards, Muslims in Spain faced forced conversions and harsh restrictions under Christian rule.

Despite its decline, Islamic Spain left a lasting impact on Europe. Historian Robert Briffault argued that Spain served as a major source for the intellectual rebirth of Europe. In his words: “Spain, not Italy, was the cradle of the Rebirth of Europe…..It was there that the new life arose which was to grow into a new phase of human evolution.”[3]

At the same time that Muslim Spain collapsed, the Ottoman Empire was rising in the east. Following the conquest of Constantinople in 1453, the Ottomans emerged as the leading Muslim power, preserving Islamic political influence after the loss of Spain.

2.4 Decline of the Ottoman Empire

Empires fall, and so did the Ottoman Empire. A commonly recognised age of empires is 250 years, and the Ottoman Empire lived for over 600 years. The Ottoman Empire fell in the era when Muslim rule around the world was fatally targeted by European colonialism; therefore, the fall was a setback to Muslims at large.

As one of the world's most powerful empires, the Ottomans ruled over vast territories in Asia, Africa and Europe. During the reign of Suleiman the Magnificent, the empire was admired for its administrative system, military capability, trade strength, and cultural achievements.

The gradual decline of the Ottoman Empire unfolded over a century. During the Industrial Revolution, the European powers modernised their armies and weaponry. The Ottoman military could not keep pace. Important territories were lost after defeats in wars against Russia and Austria.

By the nineteenth century, the political, economic, and military challenges it faced had weakened its foundations. The final blow came when, during World War I, the Ottoman Empire allied with Germany and the Central Powers. In 1918, Allied forces occupied parts of the empire, and Arab provinces were separated under British and French control. Under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, the Turkish army was able to retain Turkey in its present form.

Presently, Turkey lives as a rump state, a remnant of its great past, like other European states: Britain, France, Spain, Italy and the Netherlands. An interesting development is that it jettisoned its anti-Islam attitude to practice respect for Islam like other Muslim countries.

2.5 Colonial Hold on Muslim Lands (19th–20th Century)

The Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 restrained the tendency toward colonisation within Europe. Yet, after achieving this balance internally, Europe embarked upon the largest colonial expansion in human history across the rest of the world.
"The colonial encirclement of the world is an integral component of European history from the Early Modern Period to the phase of decolonisation."[5] The European colonial enterprise profoundly influenced both world history and Europe itself. No European country remained exempt – all directly or indirectly participated in the colonial division of the world.

The vast scale of colonialism at its peak in the early twentieth century is reflected in a statement by Edward Said in his book Culture and Imperialism: "By 1914, Europe held a grand total of roughly 85 per cent of the earth as colonies, protectorates, dependencies, dominions, and commonwealths. No other associated set of colonies in history was as large, none so totally dominated, none so unequal in power to the Western metropolis."[6]

In recent history, Muslims have gradually regained physical control over their lands and resources, though this was achieved through immense struggle and sacrifice. For clarity, the recent past and present may be divided into four periods that illustrate the condition of Muslim societies in relation to their difficult recent history.[7]

Period I: 1775–1920 – Shadows of darkness over the Muslim world.
Period II: 1920–1945 – Total domination of the Muslim world by Britain and France.
Period III: 1945–1965 – Muslim States gain Political Independence.
Current Period: 1965 to the present – Muslim affirmation.

Regaining physical control of their territories marked the first step toward an independent and dignified existence. The Muslim journey toward affirmation continues. The overall direction of Muslim societies, as reflected in the above outline, is unmistakably one of gradual improvement.

After emerging from more than a century of decline, Muslim states continue to confront the challenges associated with newly gained independence. Historical experiences deeply embedded in the consciousness of nations require time to transform into new realities. One enduring legacy within many Muslim societies has been long periods of rule under monarchies, some of which persist even today. Europe itself required more than three centuries to move toward the Age of Enlightenment; it is therefore reasonable to allow Muslim societies time to adapt to the spirit of the modern era. Dissatisfaction with the pace of progress or nostalgia should not obscure the broader reality that the trajectory of Muslim societies is moving toward improvement. The true difference between the conditions of societies becomes evident only when viewed across a sufficiently long span of history.

From the existential threat posed by the Mongol invasions to the systemic challenges of colonialism, Muslim history is replete with instances of profound adversity. Yet, Muslim societies demonstrated remarkable capacity for recovery in each case. This resilience stemmed from a combination of factors: the adaptability of Islamic legal and intellectual traditions, the unifying power of faith, the emergence of strong leadership, and the ability to absorb and integrate new influences while preserving core identities. These historical recoveries offer valuable lessons in perseverance and transformation, underscoring the dynamic and enduring nature of Muslim civilisation.

3 Resilience, the Key Strength of Muslim Civilisation

History does not move in a straight line. Civilisations rise, stumble, fall, and rise again. No people, no empire, and no community is exempt from the trials of time. The history of Muslims is no exception. Across the centuries, Muslims have faced moments of severe setbacks on the battlefield, in the collapse of empires, in the loss of lands, and in periods of moral and political decline. Yet, what is remarkable is not merely that setbacks occurred, but that again and again Muslims found the strength to recover and rise. At the heart of this resilience stood the Quran.

It is important to clarify that resilience is not unique to Muslims. Civilisations such as the Chinese, Indian, Roman, and European worlds have also repeatedly recovered from profound crises. However, the Muslim experience is distinguished by the continuity of a shared religious and civilizational identity across vast geographical spaces and long historical periods. This continuity often enabled recovery even when political institutions collapsed. The Muslim example is notable because the cycles of decline and revival are especially well documented in historical memory and continue to shape collective identity today.

The phenomenon of recovering from setbacks appears prominently in Muslim history, though it should be understood as part of the broader pattern seen in all major civilisations. What often makes the Muslim experience stand out is the repeated ability to rebuild after profound political, military, and social crises. From the early internal conflicts after the first caliphate to the Mongol destruction of Baghdad in 1258, and later the period of colonial domination, Muslim societies repeatedly produced new centres of strength, learning, and governance. After the fall of one power, others such as the Ottoman Empire, Safavid Empire, and Mughal Empire emerged, demonstrating resilience and adaptability.

Throughout its extensive history, the Islamic civilisation consistently rebuilt and re-emerged stronger from various challenges. This enduring quality is not merely a testament to political or military strength but rather to a deeply ingrained adaptability within its intellectual, cultural, and social frameworks. This ability allowed for periods of profound intellectual and scientific flourishing even after significant disruptions.

The resilience of Muslim civilisation may be understood through several interrelated factors. The concept of the *ummah*, a transregional community bound by faith, provided continuity that transcended dynastic collapse. When one empire declined, the broader religious civilisation endured. Shared institutions such as mosques, madrasas, legal traditions, and scholarly networks preserved collective memory and social cohesion.

Historically, Muslim societies demonstrated an ability to absorb and synthesise knowledge from other civilisations. This openness to knowledge strengthened the civilisation's ability to regenerate after crises. Some scholars argue that the cosmopolitan and absorptive nature of Islamic civilisation was one of the foundations of its repeated revivals.

The decentralisation of authority made the civilisation less vulnerable to total collapse. Unlike civilisations dependent on a single imperial centre, Muslim civilisation often had multiple regional hubs. When Baghdad fell, knowledge networks survived elsewhere. This polycentric structure allowed civilisational continuity despite political fragmentation.

The decentralisation helped Islamic scholarship and governance at various points in history, allowing for multiple centres of learning and power to flourish independently. When one region faced devastation, others often continued to thrive, providing havens for scholars, artists, and innovators. This geographical and intellectual dispersion contributed significantly to the civilisation's overall robustness, preventing a single point of failure from leading to total collapse. The interconnectedness of the Muslim world, through trade routes and scholarly exchanges, also facilitated the rapid dissemination of ideas and resources, aiding in recovery efforts.

Cultural adaptability and the integration of diverse peoples and traditions have also played a vital role. Muslim civilisation, at its zenith, was a melting pot of various ethnicities and cultures, all contributing to a shared intellectual and artistic heritage. This multiculturalism fostered an environment of innovation and cross-pollination of ideas, enabling societies to draw upon a wide array of human capital and perspectives when facing adversity. The capacity to integrate new elements while maintaining core principles has been a hallmark of its sustained vitality, allowing for continuous renewal and a persistent drive towards progress and development.

4 Main Support for Muslim Resilience

Human beings possess an inherent capacity to navigate and overcome adversity, a testament to the remarkable qualities embedded within their nature. The ability to recover from setbacks, often termed resilience, is not a singular trait but rather a complex interplay of psychological, emotional, and behavioural attributes that enable individuals and societies to adapt and thrive in the face of challenges[8]. These fundamental qualities provide strength to humans to face adversity.

In his Allahabad Address in 1930, Iqbal made a profound observation: “One lesson I have learnt from the history of Muslims. At critical moments in their history, it is Islam that has saved Muslims and not vice versa.”[9] This is a significant reference to the fact that the Quran has been the anchor of Muslim hope and energies through all setbacks in Muslim history. The revivalists, in the wake of each setback, called the Prophet’s life and the message of the Quran to the attention of Muslims, which provided immense support to their determination to live through hard times.

Throughout history, Muslim societies have faced moments of profound setback, military defeat, political collapse, territorial loss, and civilisational crisis. Yet again and again, they found the capacity to recover, rebuild, and rise. A central source of this resilience has been the Quran. More than a religious text, the Quran provided a moral psychology, historical outlook, and spiritual discipline that enabled Muslims to transform defeat into renewal. At the heart of this Quranic framework is the belief that setbacks are not final. The Quran teaches that hardship is part of the divine test of life and history.

Muslim revivalists have played a central role in preserving and renewing Islamic civilisation across centuries. From spiritual scholars like al-Ghazali to political thinkers like Iqbal, Maududi, and al-Banna, each responded to the unique crises of their age. Their collective legacy lies in the repeated ability of Muslim societies to intellectually, spiritually, and politically recover from setbacks. This recurring process of renewal remains one of the defining features of Islamic history.

The Quran provides profound guidance for individuals and communities facing difficulties, offering a framework for resilience, hope, and the strength to recover from setbacks. The first and perhaps most important element is *sabr* (patience and steadfastness). The Quran repeatedly teaches that setbacks are part of the divine test of life. It does not present difficulty as a sign of failure, but as a means of purification and growth. Allah says: *"O you who believe, seek help through patience and prayer. Indeed, Allah is with the patient"* (2:153). This message gave Muslims the inner strength to endure losses without surrendering to despair. Patience in the Quran is not passive suffering; it is active perseverance, continuing to struggle for what is right despite adversity.

Closely linked to patience is the Quranic promise that hardship is temporary. The verse *"Indeed, with hardship comes ease"* (94:5–6) became one of the most powerful sources of hope. By repeating this reassurance, the Quran instilled confidence that no defeat, humiliation, or suffering is permanent. This belief allowed Muslim communities to look beyond immediate setbacks and focus on eventual recovery and success.

Another major factor is trust in Allah. The Quran teaches believers to make their best effort and then place their trust in God's wisdom and plan. *"And whoever relies upon Allah, then He is sufficient for him"* (65:3). This trust transformed fear into courage. Even when materially weaker, Muslims believed that success ultimately came from divine support rather than numbers or wealth alone. Such trust prevented hopelessness after defeat and encouraged renewed effort.

A fundamental tenet of Islamic resilience is the belief that no trial is beyond one's capacity to handle, as Allah does not test a soul beyond its strength. Quran 2:286: "Allah does not charge a soul except [with that within] its capacity. It will have the consequence of what [good] it has gained, and it will bear [the consequence of] what [evil] it has earned..." This verse provides immense psychological strength, reminding believers that they possess the inner resources and divine support necessary to overcome any challenge they face.

For those who feel weakened or outnumbered by their circumstances, the Quran offers reminders of how small groups have overcome great odds with divine help. Quran 2:249:"...How many a small company has overcome a large company by permission of Allah. And Allah is with those who steadfastly preserve." This historical

and spiritual reminder encourages Muslims to focus on their faith and effort rather than just the apparent scale of the setback.

The Quran frequently mentions perseverance and steadfastness as keys to success. Quran 3:200: "O you who have believed, persevere and endure and remain stationed and fear Allah that you may be successful." This verse highlights that recovery and success are often the results of long-term endurance and maintaining one's principles despite external pressures.

The Quran constantly reminds believers that their struggles are not random events but part of a meaningful moral mission. The early Muslims, especially during persecution in Makkah, were strengthened by verses that linked suffering with a higher purpose and future reward. This long-term vision helped them endure short-term losses. When people believe their setbacks serve a larger cause, they are far more likely to recover and continue striving.

Another key Quranic element is its emphasis on self-correction after failure. A major example is the lessons drawn after the Battle of Uhud. After suffering losses, the Quran did not merely console the believers; it also called them to reflect on their mistakes, particularly issues of discipline and obedience. This is one of the Quran’s greatest strengths: it combines comfort with accountability. Rather than allowing defeat to destroy morale, it turns setbacks into opportunities for learning and reform. This mindset enabled Muslims to rise stronger after adversity.

The Quran did not promise a life free of hardship. It did not present history as a story of uninterrupted triumph. Instead, it prepared believers for struggle and taught them how to transform defeat into renewal. It gave them patience in sorrow, clarity in confusion, and hope in moments when history itself seemed to turn against them.

The Quran also cultivated unity and collective discipline. It repeatedly commands believers to remain united and avoid division. Communities often fail not because of external pressure alone, but because internal disunity weakens them. By emphasising brotherhood, consultation, and obedience to just leadership, the Quran helped Muslims rebuild collective strength after crises.

An empowering feature is the Quran’s insistence on moral resilience. It teaches believers not to respond to setbacks with panic, revenge, or loss of ethics. Instead, it promotes forgiveness, justice, and restraint. Such moral discipline prevents communities from collapsing internally during periods of stress.

In essence, what enabled Muslims to rise after setbacks was the Quran’s unique combination of patience, trust in Allah, hope after hardship, lessons from history, self-correction, unity, and a long-term spiritual vision. It did not merely comfort believers emotionally; it equipped them intellectually, morally, and spiritually to recover and rise stronger after every challenge.

The Quran's greatest historical power was not merely comforting believers after a setback; it also provided a framework for rebuilding after collapse.

The Quran taught that:

- Setbacks are temporary;
- History is cyclical;
- Reflection must follow defeat;
- Unity must replace fragmentation; and
- Moral purpose must outlive political loss.

5 The Ongoing Recovery Process

The colonial era offers a major example of the setback and a recovery process after the end of the colonial hold. From the eighteenth to the twentieth century, large parts of the Muslim world came under European imperial rule. Political sovereignty was severely weakened, and economic structures were reshaped under colonial interests. Yet the twentieth century witnessed widespread anti-colonial movements across Muslim-majority societies, leading to the emergence of independent states in the Middle East, South Asia, Africa, and Southeast Asia. Although postcolonial challenges remain substantial, this period again illustrates the capacity for collective recovery and reassertion of Muslim affirmation.

Assessing the progress or regression of the Muslim world from its recent past to present through the lenses of Defence, Education, Human Resources, and Economy offers a sufficient framework for analysis. The starting time of this comparison has been selected as the year 1950, when many Muslim-majority countries were either newly independent or still under colonial influence, leading to nascent institutions and economies largely dependent on former colonial powers. The unfolding change can be better observed by the following comparison.

5.1 Comparison of Defensive Capabilities of the Muslim World: 1950 vs. Today

The defensive capabilities of Muslim-majority nations have undergone a radical transformation over the past seven decades, shifting from post-colonial dependency to a state of significant strategic autonomy and technological innovation. This evolution reflects a broader drive within the Muslim world to secure sovereignty and project influence in an increasingly complex global security environment.

5.1.1 The 1950 Landscape: Dependency and Rebuilding

In 1950, the defensive posture of the Muslim world was defined by its recent emergence from colonial rule. Most nations were in the early stages of building professional militaries and lacked the infrastructure to sustain independent defence policies.

Militaries were almost entirely reliant on surplus equipment from World War II, provided by former colonial powers like Britain and France or the emerging superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union.[10]

There was virtually no domestic defence manufacturing. Even basic requirements, such as small arms and ammunition, were often imported. Strategic planning was frequently tied to the interests of foreign patrons, limiting the scope of national defence initiatives.

While some nations, like Egypt and Pakistan, maintained significant armies, they lacked the logistical depth and advanced weaponry required for modern, high-intensity conflict without external support.

5.1.2 The Modern Era: Strategic Autonomy and Innovation

Today, the defensive landscape is unrecognisable. Several Muslim-majority nations have emerged as significant regional and global military powers, characterised by advanced technology and domestic manufacturing.

A defining feature of the current era is the rise of sophisticated domestic defence sectors. Turkey has become a global leader in unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), with its Bayraktar drones playing decisive roles in modern conflicts[11]. Similarly, Pakistan, Iran, and Egypt have developed extensive capabilities in manufacturing tanks, fighter jets (e.g., the JF-17 Thunder), and sophisticated missile systems.[12]

Pakistan's emergence as a nuclear-armed state fundamentally altered the strategic balance in South Asia and provided the Muslim world with its first nuclear deterrent. This capability represents the pinnacle of strategic autonomy and a significant shift from the vulnerability of 1950.

Nations like Iran have pioneered asymmetric warfare doctrines, utilising advanced drone and missile technology to project power and deter conventionally superior adversaries. Furthermore, there is an increasing focus on cyber defence, artificial intelligence, and space-based assets across the Gulf states and Turkey. [13]

Far from being mere importers, several Muslim nations are now significant exporters of military hardware. Turkey's defence exports, for instance, have seen exponential growth, reflecting the global competitiveness of its technology.[11]

In defence, the journey from the colonial dependency of 1950 to the strategic autonomy of today is a testament to the resilience and vision of Muslim-majority nations. While the 1950s were a time of rebuilding and reliance on foreign equipment, the present day is defined by the integration of high-tech weaponry, domestic innovation, and a growing capacity for independent defence. This shift has not only enhanced the security of individual nations but has also positioned the Muslim world as a critical player in the global security architecture.

5.2 Comparison of Education in the Muslim World: 1950 vs. Today

The educational landscape of the Muslim world has undergone a profound and multifaceted transformation since 1950. Moving from the shadow of colonial-era restrictions to widespread illiteracy, Muslim-majority nations have built expansive and modernised systems that prioritise both mass access and high-level scientific research. This evolution reflects a strategic commitment to human development as the cornerstone of national progress in the 21st century.

5.2.1The 1950 Landscape: Barriers and Traditionalism

In 1950, education in the Muslim world was characterised by systemic barriers and a significant disconnect from the global knowledge economy. Literacy rates were strikingly low, with most of the population in many regions unable to read or write. Formal schooling was a luxury reserved for a small elite, often concentrated in urban centres.

Many educational systems were remnants of colonial rule, designed to produce low-level administrators rather than innovators or independent thinkers. Curricula often neglected local languages, cultures, and the practical needs of developing nations. [14]

There was a sharp divide between traditional religious education (madrasas) and the few existing modern schools. Traditional systems often lacked the integration of modern sciences, while modern schools were frequently viewed with suspicion as vehicles for Westernisation.

5.2.2 The Modern Era: Massification and STEM Integration

Today, the educational profile of the Muslim world is defined by its scale, inclusivity, and a forward-looking focus on science and technology.

Literacy rates have soared, with many countries achieving near-universal primary and secondary education. The expansion of schooling has been one of the most successful public policy initiatives in the post-colonial era.[15]

There has been a massive increase in the number of universities. In 1950, many Muslim countries had only one or two major universities; today, nations like Turkey, Egypt, and Indonesia boast hundreds of public and private institutions. The Arab Gulf has emerged as a significant hub for higher education, attracting branch campuses of world-renowned universities.[16]

Perhaps the most dramatic change has been in female educational attainment. In many Muslim-majority countries, women now outnumber men in university enrolment. For example, in Saudi Arabia, women represent nearly 40% of ‘Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics’ (STEM) graduates, a figure that exceeds the global average and challenges long-standing stereotypes.[17]

Modern curricula across the Muslim world now heavily emphasise STEM fields. There is a concerted effort to integrate digital literacy from an early age, preparing the youth for the fourth industrial revolution. Islamic universities, once focused primarily on theology, have evolved into comprehensive institutions where science and faith are seen as complementary.[14]

In education, the journey from the limited access of 1950 to the massified, tech-oriented systems of today is a testament to the resilience and vision of Muslim societies. While challenges such as quality control and educational equity remain, the overall trajectory is one of remarkable progress. By bridging the gap between traditional values and modern scientific inquiry, the Muslim world has positioned its educational systems as critical drivers of its future prosperity and global contribution.

5.3 Comparison of Human Resources of the Muslim World: 1950 vs. Today

The transformation of human resources within the Muslim world since 1950 is one of the most significant demographic and social shifts of the modern era. From a largely agrarian and low-literacy population emerging from colonial rule, the Muslim world has evolved into a dynamic, youthful, and increasingly skilled global workforce. This comparison highlights the profound changes in population size, educational attainment, and workforce composition.

5.3.1The 1950 Landscape: Emerging from Dependency

In 1950, the human resource profile of Muslim-majority countries was defined by the challenges of post-colonial transition and limited developmental infrastructure.

The total Muslim population was significantly smaller than today, and life expectancy was low due to limited access to modern healthcare and high infant mortality rates.[18]

Literacy rates were strikingly low, often below 20% in many regions. Higher education was a rarity, with very few universities available to the general population. Professional training in technical or administrative fields was often tied to colonial structures, leaving a gap in domestic skilled labour.[19]

The majority of the workforce was engaged in subsistence agriculture or low-skilled manual labour. Women's participation in the formal workforce was extremely limited, confined largely to domestic roles or agricultural work.

5.3.2 The Present Day: A Youthful and Skilled Powerhouse

Today, the human resource landscape of the Muslim world is characterised by its scale, youthfulness, and increasing integration into the global knowledge economy.

Muslims now constitute approximately 23% to 25% of the global population, with a median age significantly lower than that of Western or East Asian nations.[20] This "youth bulge" represents a massive potential for economic growth and innovation.

Literacy rates have soared, with many countries achieving near-universal primary and secondary education. There has been an explosion in higher education, with millions of students enrolled in universities across the Muslim world. Significant progress has been made in female education, with women now outnumbering men in university enrolment in several Muslim-majority countries.[21]

The modern Muslim workforce is highly diversified, with millions of professionals working in STEM, medicine, finance, and the arts. More than 50 million women have entered the formal workforce in Muslim-majority countries since 2000 alone.[22] Nations like Malaysia, Turkey, and the Gulf states have developed sophisticated vocational and technical training systems to meet the demands of modern industries.

The Muslim world now provides a significant portion of the global labour force, from skilled professionals in Silicon Valley and European hospitals to the essential labour force in global construction and logistics.

While the progress is undeniable in the development of human resources, challenges remain, including youth unemployment in some regions and the need for further alignment between educational outcomes and market demands. However, the collective human capital of the Muslim world today, defined by its size, diversity, and increasing skill level, is a far cry from the fragile state of 1950. The focus has shifted from basic literacy to high-tech innovation and global leadership, positioning the Muslim world's human resources as a critical driver of the 21st-century global economy.

5.4 Comparison of the Economy of Muslim Countries: 1950 vs. Today

The economic trajectory of Muslim-majority nations over the past seven decades has been defined by a dramatic shift from agrarian, colonial-dependent structures to highly diversified, resource-rich, and increasingly influential global markets. This evolution reflects the complex interplay of decolonisation and a strategic pivot toward industrialisation and technology.

5.4.1 The 1950 Economic Landscape: Fragility and Dependency

In 1950, the economies of most Muslim-majority countries were in a state of profound transition and vulnerability. Many were emerging from colonial rule, inheriting economic structures designed primarily to serve the needs of European metropoles rather than local populations.

Most Muslim-majority nations were heavily dependent on subsistence agriculture and the export of raw materials. Industrial bases were minimal, and modern infrastructure was concentrated in a few colonial-developed enclaves.[23]

Per capita income across the Muslim world was among the lowest globally, with high rates of poverty and minimal integration into international trade networks.[24]

While oil had been discovered in the Middle East, its exploitation was largely controlled by Western companies through concession agreements that provided limited benefits to the host nations.

5.4.2 The Modern Economic Era: Diversification and Global Influence

Today, the economic landscape is unrecognisable from that of 1950. The Muslim world now includes some of the world's wealthiest nations as well as rapidly growing emerging markets.

The nationalisation of oil resources and the formation of OPEC fundamentally altered the global wealth distribution. Today, Gulf nations like Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar possess some of the world's largest sovereign wealth funds, which they use to invest globally and drive domestic development.

Many nations have successfully moved beyond resource dependency. Turkey has become a major manufacturing hub for Europe; Malaysia and Indonesia have emerged as global leaders in electronics and palm oil; and the UAE has transformed into a global centre for tourism, finance, and logistics. [25]

The global Islamic economy, encompassing Islamic finance, halal food, and modest fashion, is now a multi-trillion-dollar sector. Islamic finance, in particular, has become a mainstream ethical alternative in global markets, fostering intra-OIC (Organisation of Islamic Cooperation) trade and investment.[26]

From Dubai's "Silicon Oasis" to Malaysia's "Multimedia Super Corridor," there is a concerted push toward the digital economy. Startups and tech innovation are increasingly driving growth, supported by significant investments in education and digital infrastructure.

Despite advancements in the economy, the Muslim world faces economic disparities. While some nations enjoy high standards of living, others struggle with political instability, debt, and unemployment. The challenge for the future lies in ensuring that economic growth is inclusive and sustainable, reducing reliance on volatile commodity markets and further integrating into the global knowledge economy. Yet the work on the economy shows a movement towards improvement.

In conclusion, the journey from the agrarian dependency of 1950 to the diversified global influence of today is a testament to the resilience and strategic vision of

Muslim-majority nations. They have moved from the periphery of the global economy to become central players in energy, finance, and trade.

6 Conclusions

The narrative suggesting that the Muslim world is in a state of terminal regression is a persistent but increasingly outdated trope. This narrative extends over centuries. Scholars have carried out a dedicated search to trace and document its history. The recent colonial era has widely used and expanded this narrative. Hence the need to 'decolonise the mind'. The concept of decolonising the mind was popularised by Ngugi wa Thiong'o of Kenya in his book "Decolonising the Mind", which is used here as Reference No. 22.

Decolonisation has restored the physical control of ex-colonies over their lands, but their struggle to fully free themselves from Western control is ongoing. The struggle is against world-renowned imperialism, which, because of the superior economic and military prowess of the West, influences its interaction with the developing world. "Imperialism is total: it has economic, political, military and psychological consequences for the people of the world today…..the oppressed and the exploited of the earth maintain their defiance….. the biggest weapon wielded and actually daily unleashed by imperialism against that collective defiance is the cultural bomb…..It makes them see their past as one wasteland of non-achievement and makes them want to distance themselves from that wasteland."[22]

Major setbacks of Muslim history have been overviewed above. The resilience Muslims have displayed in recovering from each setback is an apparent fact of their entire history. The same resilience is on display during their ongoing recovery from colonisation.

Reasoned scrutiny leads to a conclusion different from the one suggested by stereotypes. The selected indicators of defence, education, human resources and economy have been used to determine whether Muslims progress or regress in the current world. In each case, the direction of their movement is clearly towards progress.

The post-colonial experience of Muslims is a complex narrative of resilience, adaptation, and gradual recovery. It is a continuing effort to reconcile historical inheritance with the demands and opportunities of the modern age. The 21st century is witnessing the emergence of a Muslim world that is confident, technologically adept, economically vital, and socially evolving.

While challenges such as political instability, income inequality, and reliance on natural resources remain, the overall trajectory indicates substantial progress across the key indicators. The above review of Muslims' postcolonial work provides a robust foundation for determining that their movement is towards progress.

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